

Reflections on Church Attendance Part One

by Bryce William Klassen

I've heard time and time again how church attendance is dwindling across North America. Not just now, because of Covid-19, but generally speaking. According to these statistics, such a trend began decades ago. So when I hear about people not returning to church now that restrictions are lifted, I can't help but wonder if this is not just a speeding up of the inevitable. That would mean in order to understand why people aren't returning, we would have to go back to the beginning of this trend and ask ourselves why.

Here is an excerpt from Gallup: "U.S. church membership was 70% or higher from 1937 through 1976, falling modestly to an average of 68% in the 1970s through the 1990s. The past 20 years have seen an acceleration in the drop-off, with a 20-percentage-point decline since 1999 and more than half of that change occurring since the start of the current decade."

So there you have it. Americans (and we are going to assume these numbers reflect our own here in Canada) are less "religious" than ever. Now, one could be surprised, but is there any reason to be? Secularization is something that progresses, and barring an act of God, there is little reason to think we are going to get back to our "glory" days.

There are a number of ways to look at this; or maybe there are just two. I would say three. That is: 1) it's extremely upsetting and we should be highly concerned, 2) it's a test that will separate the wheat from the chaff, or, and this is my opinion, 3) there is both a positive *and* negative side to this.

On the negative side, people are hearing the Word far less. They are praising God far less, and they are turning to idols. Everyone worships something, it's not a matter of *when* but *what*. For the culture at large, this can be just about anything.

Celebrities are a dime a dozen, and politicians demand a great deal of our attention. Furthermore, universities and their faculty are anything but an objective, religiously tolerant atmosphere that encourage the relationship between faith and reason. In fact, logic is not something most students are familiar with, and so few people think critically about faith at all anymore, Christian or otherwise. Basically, the society becomes like a giant sponge and soaks up all the mantras and adopts all the vague slogans and joins whichever trend is the most "safe". In this environment, it is anything but popular to be a devoted Christian. And I don't mean just someone who attends church, but someone who acknowledges, heart and soul, the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. Which leads to my next point.

We shouldn't be focused so much on quantity of worshippers, but *quality*. It was easy to be a Christian in this culture for years, and now it is not. So in a sense, maybe the depth of faith hasn't changed all that much, but there is no pressure for the otherwise irreligious to show up on Sunday morning. In their defense, why bother? If church is just a thing you have to do to keep up appearances, there is no real meaningful reason to go, is there? So now, if people are forced to make a choice between culture and church, and choosing church is difficult and unpopular, then we will perhaps get a better glimpse of who is serious about this whole following Christ business. Of course, I do not mean that being a Christian can be reduced to going to church on Sunday, but I am simply referring to a general indicator. I know that people don't attend regularly for other reasons too!

Furthermore, I think the West (America, Canada) has had her chance. We once considered ourselves Christian nations, but things are so different. Even then, it wasn't like things were perfect. Especially if the majority of people attending church didn't even want to be there. Now the tide has shifted.

Christianity is accelerating throughout many countries in the East, especially those places where being a Christian is hardest. Which just goes to prove my point, when times get tough, faith manifests itself in a very real way. If we want attendance to go back up, maybe things have to get a little tougher?

On Friday I want to reflect on the future of the church here in North America a little more. Specifically with regard to the reports I've heard about attendees and Covid. It seems that many churches have taken a real hit in all this and people simply don't feel like they need to show up again. What does this mean? And how should we go about dealing with it? What are your thoughts? Let me know by sending an email to bryceklassen@gmail.com

In Love,
Bryce